

Chapter 11

Innovative Adaptation of Training and Technical Assistance: Education for the Behavioral Health Workforce

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ABSTRACT

The behavioral health workforce is pivotal to provide evidence-based services (EBPs) for patients with mental illnesses or substance use disorders. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing health-care issues for these patients and highlighted the need for a well-trained workforce. The stay-at-home orders compelled a rapid transition to delivering behavioral health services from traditional face-to-face encounters to telehealth/telecommunication services. Training and technical assistance (TTA) networks supporting the behavioral health workforce's educational needs quickly moved to virtual delivery. This shift has resulted in innovations and adaptations categorized into four areas: adapting is crucial, convening stakeholders is essential, resources (human and technological) are needed, and community involvement is integral. Future TTA efforts should focus on sharing the successful virtual adaptations to EBPs.

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INTRODUCTION

Behavioral health workforce refers to the group of practitioners that work to prevent or treat people with a mental illness or substance use disorder. It is an interprofessional group of practitioners including doctors, nurses, social workers, addiction counselors, psychologists, pre-professional graduate students, as well as people with “lived experience” such as peer recovery support specialists and prevention specialists. The behavioral health workforce plays a pivotal role in ensuring people across the U.S. have access to essential mental health and substance use services. “Substance use is the use—even one time—of any psychoactive compounds (substances) with the potential to cause health and social problems” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2016, p. 1–4). Substances are categorized as alcohol (e.g., beer, wine, and liquor); illicit drugs (e.g., cocaine and heroin); prescription medications that are used for nonmedical purposes (e.g., pain relievers) and over-the-counter drugs or other substances (e.g., cough and cold medicines and inhalants). A “substance use disorder (SUD) is the repeated, regular misuse of any of the substances that may lead to the development of a substance use disorder” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2016, pp. 1–4).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing issues of mental health and substance use disorders and highlighted the need for a strong, resilient, and well-trained workforce. Forty-four million American adults have a diagnosable mental health condition (Mental Health America, 2021). Globally, an estimated 35.6 million people suffer from substance use disorders (Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). The onset of the pandemic and the subsequent economic recession have negatively affected people’s mental health, creating new barriers for people already suffering from mental illnesses and substance use disorders (Panchal et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

The pandemic presents an unprecedented set of challenges for a field that is already stressed. A key factor in building a robust behavioral health workforce is the availability and accessibility of federally funded *training and technical assistance* (TTA). TTA refers to “the planning, development, and delivery of activities designed to achieve specific learning objectives, resolve problems, and foster the application of innovative approaches” and to “develop and strengthen the specialized behavioral healthcare and primary healthcare workforce that provides substance use disorder treatment and recovery support services” (Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d., para. 1; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2017).

The University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC) has been the parent organization for innovative federally funded TTA grants for the past 27 years. The Collaborative to Advance Health Services (CAHS) is composed of a cadre of interprofessional staff from the fields of nursing, social work, education, public health, pharmacy, business administration, and other fields. The mission of CAHS is to “advance health and wellness by bringing research to practice, supporting organizations through change processes and providing high quality training and technical assistance to the health workforce” (CAHS, 2019, para. 1). CAHS has led several national and international training and technical assistance networks. These networks’ goals are to provide high-quality, evidence-based training and technical assistance to interprofessional audiences in the health and behavioral health fields.

This chapter describes the training and educational practices employed by CAHS to develop and implement national and international TTA networks. Specifically, the chapter aims to cover a broad range of concepts and topics and to achieve the following objectives:

1. Describe the educational needs of the behavioral health care workforce before and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

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